Security Council

Sixtieth year

Provisional

5181st meeting

Wednesday, 18 May 2005, 10 a.m.
New York

President:	Ms. Løj	(Denmark)
Members:	Algeria	Mr. Baali
	Argentina	Mr. Mayoral
	Benin	Mr. Zinsou
	Brazil	Mr. Valle
	China	Mr. Zhang Yishan
	France	Mr. De La Sablière
	Greece	Mr. Vassilakis
	Japan	Mr. Oshima
	Philippines	Mr. Baja
	Romania	Mr. Dumitru
	Russian Federation	Mr. Denisov
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Thomson
	United Republic of Tanzania	Mr. Mahiga
	United States of America	Mrs. Patterson

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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05-34811 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President: In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

It is so decided.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs. I now give him the floor.

Mr. Prendergast: I would like to start, if I may, with the Quartet meeting held in Moscow on 9 May. The aim of the meeting was to review the current situation in the Middle East, with a particular focus on Gaza disengagement. The Secretary-General, Secretary of State Rice, European Union High Representative Solana and their host, the Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation, Sergey Lavrov, took the opportunity to reiterate the Quartet's commitment to the two-State solution and their support for Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and parts of the northern West Bank as a way of re-energizing the road map. The principals reminded both parties of the need to avoid unilateral actions that might pre-judge final status issues, and they urged the parties to implement their obligations under the road map.

The Quartet's substantive discussion focused on how best to help the parties maintain the momentum at this fragile moment of opportunity. The Quartet expressed its full support for the important tasks of its Special Envoy for Gaza Disengagement, Mr. James Wolfensohn, and for Lieutenant-General William Ward, United States Security Coordinator, both of whom were present at the meeting in Moscow.

Mr. Wolfensohn briefed the Quartet principals on his first round of talks with the parties in the region. His priority is a rapid-action programme aimed at bringing about immediate and tangible improvement for Gazans in the situation on the ground prior to the pullout and, simultaneously, to build momentum for Palestinian economic recovery and a more viable future State. Mr. Wolfensohn stressed that his mission would support and strengthen the role of the Palestinian Authority. He also emphasized that he would be working with, and complementary to, existing donor structures.

I am very pleased to report that the new United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority, Mr. Alvaro de Soto, was able to join the Secretary-General and me in Moscow. Mr. De Soto, whose duties include acting as the Secretary-General's envoy to the Quartet, brings to his new position a very wide range of experience in United Nations peacemaking. I am sure that he will want to brief the Council himself in the next month or two on his first impressions.

Prime Minister Sharon announced on 9 May that the Gaza disengagement would be delayed by three weeks from the original target date to avoid a traditional Jewish period of mourning. The practical preparations for the withdrawal, however, are progressing, as are the Government's efforts to find acceptable solutions for the relocation of settlers — this despite escalating opposition from a vocal minority of the Israeli public, as witnessed in the widespread protests and demonstrations that occurred on 16 May and earlier on 27 April.

Fortunately, the stated readiness of Israelis and Palestinians to coordinate the Israeli disengagement has begun to be reflected in practice. On 21 April, direct talks were renewed between the parties after a gap of more than a month. The various players included the Israeli Vice Prime Minister and Defence Minister as well as Prime Minister Sharon's senior adviser and, on the Palestinian side, the Prime Minister, the Minister for Civil Affairs and the Palestinian Chief Negotiator. We hope that in the near future, Prime Minister Sharon and President Abbas will continue the dialogue that they began at Sharm el-Sheikh in February.

I would like to stress once again the need for dialogue and coordination. The Israeli withdrawal from

Gaza and the northern West Bank marks an important landmark in Israeli-Palestinian relations. The evacuation of settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory sets an important precedent. Continued bilateral coordination will be one way to ensure that disengagement proceeds successfully and contributes to the momentum for peace. Combined with the efforts of the Quartet's Special Envoy for Gaza Disengagement, in particular on the economic front, the Israeli pullout should be seen as a highly significant step along the road towards realizing the vision of two States, Israel and a sovereign, viable and contiguous Palestine, living side by side in peace and security.

In recent weeks and months, the Palestinian Authority continued to take specific steps towards reforming the structure of the security services. As confirmed by Lieutenant-General Ward, there was ongoing work to consolidate the fragmented Palestinian security services into three agencies under the authority of the Ministry of Interior. New heads of the security services have been appointed and the security retirement law is being implemented. Furthermore, both President Abbas and Interior Minister Yousef issued strong statements concerning the illegal possession of arms.

The Quartet welcomed those developments at its meeting on 9 May, but emphasized the need for the Palestinian Authority to continue implementing such reforms in order to reinstate law and order in Gaza and the West Bank and to meet its road map obligation to end violence and terror. In his briefing to the Quartet, General Ward noted that reform was an urgent priority for the short-term and long-term success of the Gaza disengagement process, as the Palestinian Authority must be able to secure its borders, assets and crossing points.

Events on the ground can be an accurate indicator of the underlying dynamic of a situation. The current level of violence between Palestinians and Israelis still remains far below that which prevailed before the Sharm el-Sheikh summit. However, as I pointed out in last month's briefing, we are concerned by reports of a slow but steady increase in violent incidents, compounding a corresponding deterioration in trust and confidence between the two sides. The violence included attacks by Palestinian militants against Israelis, clashes between Israeli security forces and Palestinian protestors and Israeli arrest operations against wanted militants. Eight Palestinians and one Israeli were killed, and some 133 Palestinians and 25 Israelis were injured. Among the fatalities were two Palestinian teenagers who were shot when a group of youths threw stones at Israeli bulldozers working on the construction of the barrier near Beit Lakia in the West Bank. The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) is reportedly investigating that tragic and most unfortunate incident.

It is also cause for grave concern that the Israeli security forces reported intercepting a number of would-be suicide bombers in the West Bank. On 4 May, the IDF discovered and detonated a 40-kilogram bomb north of the Sufa crossing between Gaza and Israel. In Gaza, Palestinian militants resumed firing mortar shells and Qassam rockets, fortunately causing no casualties, but damaging properties in Israeli settlements and in Israeli villages and towns outside the Gaza Strip.

There is no doubt as to the legitimacy of Israel's security concerns. The Palestinian Authority must strengthen its efforts to end all violent activity and must produce tangible results on the ground. Meanwhile, Israel can and should do more to support the Palestinian leadership in its difficult task. The doubts and the suspicions on both sides may be understandable, but they need to be addressed through constructive engagement and sustained bilateral contacts.

Specifically, we urge Israel to work directly with the Palestinians to find a way to implement the commitments made at Sharm el-Sheikh. Further delays in handing over the remaining three Palestinian cities and in releasing prisoners threaten seriously to undermine President Abbas. It would be difficult for the Palestinian Authority to undertake sustained and sustainable action on security unless it is aided and supported in its efforts to rein in the militants. A significant and positive step forward in that context is Israel's reported approval of the deployment of hundreds of armed Palestinian police in all West Bank cities in order to strengthen the Palestinian Authority ahead of a transfer of further areas to Palestinian security control.

On 5 May, Palestinians held a second round of local elections in 84 municipalities in Gaza and the West Bank. Hamas won a substantial share of the vote and of the municipal councils. That is an indication of the support the militants enjoy among the Palestinian population, partly as a result of their engagement in social welfare activities. But it also reflects popular frustration with the Palestinian Authority.

The Palestinians continued with their preparations for the legislative elections still scheduled for 17 July. On 20 April, the Palestinian Legislative Council gave preliminary approval to a revised electoral law for the legislative vote, which envisages a two-to-one mix of constituency-based and national representation. A date for the third and final reading of the law has not yet been set.

Additional voter registration in preparation for the elections began on 7 May and will last until 21 May. Regrettably, on 10 May the Israeli authorities closed two voter registration centres and briefly detained two members of the Palestinian Central Elections Commission staff in East Jerusalem. We reiterate the Quartet's call on both Israel and the Palestinian Authority to undertake the steps necessary to ensure free, credible and transparent multi-party legislative elections in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, including through the facilitation and conduct of the voter registration.

Despite the relative calm and the slight improvement in terms of closure conditions over the past two months, there has been little improvement in the dire Palestinian economic situation. Unemployment remained high, and even increased slightly to 32 per cent during the first quarter of 2005. Protest marches by unemployed workers in Gaza on 1 May highlight the need for urgent action to generate employment. We hope that the programme now in preparation by the Quartet's Special Envoy will make a significant contribution to alleviating the effects of the continued crisis.

We remain extremely concerned about the continued construction of Israel's barrier in the West Bank. On Monday, 16 May, the Israeli High Court of Justice rescinded the temporary injunctions it had previously imposed on the construction of the barrier around the West Bank settlement of Ariel. The route of the barrier in this area cuts deeply into occupied Palestinian territory. That is worrying not only because of the effects of the barrier on the daily lives of Palestinians, but also because it threatens unilaterally to prejudge the outcome of eventual bilateral negotiations between the parties.

While there have been some hopeful recent signs in Lebanon, the situation there too remains fragile. On 6 May, another bombing in a Christian neighbourhood, in the city of Jounieh, killed one person and wounded several others. We reiterate our condemnation of such attacks and stress the belief shared by the international community that Lebanon must be free of such acts of violence and intimidation.

Lebanon is now preparing for parliamentary elections later this month, which the new Government under Prime Minister Mikati has committed itself to hold, beginning on 29 May. A United Nations team began its work in Beirut on 9 May to prepare the provision of support and technical assistance for the elections. The United Nations will also support international observers deployed by other countries and organizations, with the aim of ensuring proper coordination amongst all observers.

The United Nations has continued its efforts to establish the international independent investigation commission to look into the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri, pursuant to resolution 1595 (2005). On 13 May, the Secretary-General announced his intention to appoint Detlev Mehlis as Commissioner. Mr. Mehlis, an experienced prosecutor, will deploy to Lebanon shortly. He will review the information collected by other investigative bodies to enable him to determine the starting point for his work. We plan to deploy investigators and other substantive personnel on a rolling basis in the coming weeks to enable the work of the Commission to proceed as quickly as possible.

A series of incidents last week escalated tensions along the Blue Line to an alarming degree. First, on 9 May, the IDF accidentally fired a shell into Lebanon, into an open area east of Al-Khiam, in the course of an operation to destroy booby traps in the Shab'a farms area. Then, on 11 May, a Katyusha rocket fired from the vicinity of Naqoura in Lebanon landed in the Israeli town of Shelomi, causing significant property damage. There was no reaction from the IDF. The following day, the IDF claimed that two missiles were launched from near Ghajar into the Shab'a farms, though no impact was reported. Though the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) was unable to verify that claim, local residents reported hearing explosions. Finally, on 13 May, there was an exchange of fire between Hizbullah and the IDF. UNIFIL first recorded small arms fire from the vicinity of an IDF position in the Shab'a farms. Local Lebanese residents claimed a house was hit. This was followed by several loud explosions near IDF positions. Hizbullah claimed responsibility for the attack, stating that it came in

retaliation for the IDF machine gun fire into Kafr Shuba that morning and for the IDF shell of 9 May. Subsequently the IDF launched tank and artillery rounds, six aerial bombs and several rockets into a broad swathe of Lebanese territory from Kafr Kila to Shaba. There was also an exchange of fire between the IDF and Hizbullah in the general area south of Rmeich. Fortunately, no casualties were attributed to any of these incidents.

Hostile acts and infractions across the Blue Line must stop. While last week's firing incidents were ultimately contained, the risk was great that events could spiral out of control. It bears repeating in this Council that one violation cannot justify another.

Stability in south Lebanon depends to a large extent on the Government of Lebanon exercising its authority over all of its territory. The Secretary-General has reiterated his call upon the Lebanese authorities to exercise effective control throughout the country, to exert the Government's monopoly on the use of force and to put an end to all attacks emanating from Lebanese soil.

During the past month, Israeli air violations of the Blue Line also continued to occur, albeit less frequently. The Secretary-General has reiterated his concern regarding these continuing air violations and has reminded all parties of their commitment to fully respect the Blue Line, which was unanimously endorsed by the Security Council.

The people of the Middle East are now approaching a number of important turning points. It is our sincere hope that recent events in the region will be remembered as a new start on the road towards peace, rather than as a slide back into conflict and violent confrontation.

The President: I thank Mr. Prendergast for his briefing.

In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.35 a.m.